

Rules of the Game

All About Illusions (Part One)

By Skip Williams



One can use an **illusion** spell to simulate just about anything a person can dream up -- though more complex examples of phantasmagoria are beyond the limits of lower-level illusion **spells**. Still, the illusion school caters to player and **DM** creativity to a degree no other school can match.

It's no surprise that illusion spells cause difficulties in play, especially when players start testing the spells' limits. Fortunately for beleaguered DMs and confused players, the rules offer some pretty strong guidelines for handling illusion spells. As is often the case, it can prove tough to remember and follow those guidelines when a gaming session really starts to heat up. In this series, we'll examine what the rules have to say about illusion spells and offer some practical tips for applying them during a game.

This series draws heavily on an earlier *Rules of the Game* series: [Reading Spell Descriptions](#) and on the discussion of the illusion school on pages 173-174 in the *Player's Handbook*.

From pages 173-174 of the *Player's Handbook*:

Illusion

Illusion spells deceive the senses or minds of others. They cause people to see things that are not there, not see things that are there, hear phantom noises, or remember things that never happened. Representative illusions include *silent image*, *invisibility*, and *veil*. Illusions come in five types: figments, glamers, patterns, phantasms, and shadows.

Figment: A figment spell creates a false sensation. Those who perceive the figment perceive the same thing, not their own slightly different versions of the figment. (It is not a personalized mental impression.) Figments cannot make something seem to be something else. A figment that includes audible effects cannot duplicate intelligible speech unless the spell description specifically says it can. If intelligible speech is possible, it must be in a language you can speak. If you try to duplicate a language you cannot speak, the image produces gibberish. Likewise, you cannot make a visual copy of something unless you know what it looks like.

Because figments and glamers (see below) are unreal, they cannot produce real effects the way that other types of illusions can. They cannot cause damage to objects or creatures, support weight, provide nutrition, or provide protection from the elements. Consequently, these spells are useful for confounding or delaying foes, but useless for attacking them directly. For example, it is possible to use a *silent image* spell to create an illusory cottage, but the cottage offers no protection from rain.

A figment's AC is equal to 10 + its size modifier.

Glamer: A glamer spell changes a subject's sensory qualities, making it look, feel, taste, smell, or sound like something else, or even seem to disappear.

Pattern: Like a figment, a pattern spell creates an image that others can see, but a pattern also affects the minds of those who see it or are caught in it. All patterns are mind-affecting spells.

Phantasm: A phantasm spell creates a mental image that usually only the caster and the subject (or subjects) of the spell can perceive. This impression is totally in the minds of the subjects. It is a personalized mental impression. (It's all in their heads and not a fake picture or something that they actually see.) Third parties viewing or studying the scene don't notice the phantasm. All phantasms are mind-affecting spells.

Shadow: A shadow spell creates something that is partially real from extradimensional energy. Such illusions can have real effects. Damage dealt by a shadow illusion is real.

Saving Throws and Illusions (Disbelief): Creatures encountering an illusion usually do not receive saving throws to recognize it as illusory until they study it carefully or interact with it in some fashion. For example, if a party encounters a section of illusory floor, the character in the lead would receive a saving throw if she stopped and studied the floor or if she probed the floor.

A successful saving throw against an illusion reveals it to be false, but a figment or phantasm remains as a translucent outline. For example, a character making a successful saving throw against a figment of an illusory section of floor knows the "floor" isn't safe to walk on and can see what lies below (light permitting), but he or she can still note where the figment lies.

A failed saving throw indicates that a character fails to notice something is amiss. A character faced with proof that an illusion isn't real needs no saving throw. A character who falls through a section of illusory floor into a pit knows something is amiss, as does one who spends a few rounds poking at the same illusion. If any viewer successfully disbelieves an illusion and communicates this fact to others, each such viewer gains a saving throw with a +4 bonus.

Illusion Basics

As with any spell in the **D&D** game, a look at the spell's header (the tabulated information that precedes the text description for the spell) can settle many questions about how the spell works. For a quick tour of the spell header, see Rules of the Game: Reading Spell Descriptions, Parts Two through Six.

Most difficulties that arise from an illusion spell vanish when you consider a few key elements in the header. These include the following:

- The spell's subschool.

The illusion school has five subschools: **figment**, **glamer**, **pattern**, **phantasm**, and **shadow**. Each school has distinct properties that define how the spell works. When determining exactly what the caster can accomplish with an illusion spell, first consider the subschool.

- The spell's area, target, or effect entry.

This entry determines how you can aim the spell and where whatever you create with it can go after the spell takes effect. Many illusion spells produce images that can't move (or move very far), which limits the sorts of things the caster can do with the spell.

- The spell's **saving throw** entry.

Some illusion spells have a kind of saving throw that poses some difficulties of its own.

Illusion Subschools

If you remember what illusion spells of each subschool can do, you'll avoid a lot of hassles (and dashed expectations) in play. Here's an overview:

Figment: These spells create false sensations of creatures, objects, or forces. A figment always must create the impression of something new. It cannot make something seem to be something else. For example, you can use a figment to create an illusory cover for an open pit (more about this in Part Four). You cannot, however, use it to conceal a trap door since that would be making something seem like something else.

If a figment spell can produce sound, it cannot duplicate intelligible speech unless the spell description specifically says so.

A figment is unreal and cannot produce real effects; it can't deal damage, support weight, provide nutrition, or act as a barrier (except that a visible figment can block line of sight). You can use a figment to fool opponents, but you can't harm them or affect them directly. For example, a wall of figment flames might cause foes to halt or make a detour, but it won't burn anything.

If you create the image of a creature with a figment spell, you usually can make it move around, but only within the spell's area, which usually isn't mobile. An illusory creature created with a figment spell cannot deal any damage. You can send it into combat, however. The figment has an **Armor Class** of 10 + its **size modifier** (see page 173 in the *Player's Handbook*). The rules don't say what a figment's attack **bonus** is. Your attack bonus is a good default; remember that a figment cannot deal damage or have any other real effect, however.

Glamour: A glamour spell makes the recipient look, feel, taste, smell, or sound like something else, or even seem to disappear.

Beware of attempts to use figments as glamers. For example, you can use a figment to create an apple tree, but you can't use a figment to make your buddy look like an apple tree. You'd need a glamour spell to perform the latter trick.



Like a figment, a glamer can't have any real effects. If you use a glamer to make your human buddy look like an apple tree, you can't pick edible apples from the character.

Pattern: A pattern spell creates a visible magical image. The spellcaster usually doesn't have control over the image's appearance; instead, the spell usually specifies how the pattern looks. A pattern's image has some affect on viewers' minds. All patterns have the mind-affecting descriptor. Patterns have no effects on creatures that cannot see. Unlike a figment or glamer, a pattern can have real effects; however, those effects are limited to those set out in the spell description.

Phantasm: These spells create mental images. Usually, only the caster and the spell's recipient (or recipients) can perceive the image a phantasm spell creates. All phantasms have the mind-affecting descriptor. Like a pattern, a phantasm can have real effects, as set out in the spell description. Also like a pattern, a phantasm's exact details usually aren't under the caster's control.

Because a phantasm exists in the recipient's mind, the recipient can perceive it no matter what its sensory capabilities are.

Shadow: A shadow spell creates something that is partially real, but made mostly from extradimensional energies the caster brings together with the spell. A shadow is similar to a figment, but it can have real effects because it's partially real itself. Unlike a figment, a shadow spell usually limits what the caster can duplicate or depict with the spell.

A shadow's physical characteristics (such as **ability scores**, Armor Class, attack bonus, **hit points**, and the like) are defined in the spell description, and they might vary depending on what the shadow depicts or duplicates. Part Four has more to say about shadows.

What's Next?

That's all we have time for this week. Next week, we'll complete our look at illusion basics.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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